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SPEECH

OF

HON. W. W. WOODWORTH, OF N. YORK.

ON

THE WILMOT PROVISO.

DELIVERED

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 3, 1847.

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THE WILMOT PROVISO.

Mr. WOODWORTH, of New York, addressed the House as follows, in explanation of his vote on the Wilmot Proviso:

Mr. SPEAKER: I feel indebted to my distinguished friend from Massachusetts [Mr. ASHMUN] for the opportunity he allows me of saying a few words in explanation of the vote I have just given on the Wilmot proviso. From that gentleman's known courtesy, I could have expected no less; and the friendly relations that have subsisted between us—relations in no degree hazarded by the difference in our political opinions—receive new strength from his present kindness.

Mr. Speaker, it is true that I voted for the Wilmot proviso: it is known to many that I gave early notice of my determination to do so. I have had no disguise on the subject; have affected no mystery in relation to my conduct. The *principle* of the proviso has ever commanded the assent of my heart; its *assertion*, I have maintained during the last and present session, should depend on favorable opportunity.

I am content, for one, Mr. Speaker, to leave slavery where the Constitution has left it. The Constitution—that glorious offspring of mutual compromise—gives no power to the slave States of adding to their number; nor does it authorize the free States to intertere with slavery, so as in any manner to affect its character. In the States where it existed on the adoption of the Constitution, the institution of slavery is protected from external assault by the provisions, express or implied, of that instrument; but under it, it cannot extend itself to the acquisition of other territory; and all territory since acquired, with slavery existing therein, has been with the sufferance and by the consent of the free States. Slavery has been conceded by the North in more than one instance to the territorial extension of the South, in consideration of commercial or other advantages acquired thereby. So it was in the purchase of Louisiana and Florida, and so in the annexation of Texas.

I am not disposed now, Mr. Speaker, to go over the well-trodden ground of the origin of this war. Whether it necessarily resulted from the annexation of Texas, or whether it was provoked, and rendered inevitable by the march of our army upon the Rio Grande, or whether, as I hold, it was forced upon us by the Mexicans themselves, I do not intend at present to consider. It is sufficient for me to know, that by an act—a solemn and deliberate act—of our own Government, war with Mexico has been declared to exist. And although I am willing to give all credit that is due the gentlemen who have supported with so much ability either or all of these hypotheses, I had rather praise their ingenuity than imitate their example.

Mr. Speaker, we are in the midst of a war, and we must bear and conduct it with all our patriotism and all our energies. War, at the best, is an evil—an almost intolerable evil—and should never commence but when peace is no longer to be maintained with honor; should always terminate when peace can be obtained and honor satisfied. But I am not one of those, Mr. Speaker, who affect a mawkish horror of war, or denounce it in all cases and under all circumstances, as the most iniquitous of iniquities. On the contrary, I hold that it is often the preventive of far greater evils; wards off, rather than induces, national calamity; develops the energies of the mind, ever more active under excitement; and, above all, brings out and cultivates that ardent patriotism whose full development alone can perpetuate the union of these States.

But, Mr. Speaker, the genius of this country lies in peace. The only two wars in which our Republic hitherto had been engaged, were wars of inevitable necessity: by the first we asserted and secured the political independence of our country; by the other, we assumed and defended a principle, destined to wide and universal imitation—*the safety of the citizen under the flag of his country on all neutral ground.* For these we fought, and in these we triumphed.

By no fault of our own, war has been precipitated upon us. And it becomes us to endure this new and unenviable relation with all our philosophy, all the time seeking an opportunity to terminate it peaceably.

The earliest feasible mode of putting an end to the unfortunate hostilities now subsisting between us and Mexico, I have thought, ever since he urged it, was this proposition of the President. I am confident he is much better advised than we are of the influence that pervades Mexican coun-

ds. His superior information he cannot impart to us, without at the same time endangering, if not utterly destroying, the hopes of peace of which it is the cause. I have that abiding confidence in his sagacity, and in the wisdom of the council by whom he surrounds himself, to give him this evidence of our trust, and grant him, *without restriction*, the three million loan.

Were we at war with an established government, Mr. Speaker—a government in whose engagements we could repose any confidence, or of whose deration we entertained any hope—the usual forms of diplomacy might alone be necessary for intercommunication. But there is in Mexico, properly speaking, no established authority; all power there is uncertain and indefinite; the nominal President of to-day may be supplanted to-morrow, and he abdicated to give way in equal rapidity to as nominal a successor. Each one in turn assumes and relinquishes supreme authority; and the very facility of change, in natural consequence, begets a desire therefor.

But there is one power in Mexico, Mr. Speaker, which, unrecognized in the constitution of the State, and in direct opposition to its laws, controls its affairs. With that power we could treat. It is the ARMED POWER of Mexico. It is its Congress of Layonete, its representatives at San Luis.

I would send to them, Mr. Speaker, the sword and the purse, both in such force. It was the old Roman method of negotiating a peace, and it has lost none of its efficacy by its transmission through centuries. "Choose ye the one or the other," let our minister, civil or military, be instructed to say, and let him be provided with the ability to compel and bind them to their option.

Nor am I alone or unsupported in the position I have ascended. Many of my political friends, I am happy to think—if my most sagacious and influential political friends, hold with me this opinion. I am glad to find that it commands a majority in Congress. We lose nothing by the experiment—we may gain much by it.

And, Mr. Speaker, this opinion is not confined to the political party to which I have the honor to belong. It is cultivated to a certain extent among my political opponents—men who have too much regard for the interests of their country, of which peace is the great promoter, to encourage the narrow spirit of partisanship. But lately *I saw one or two correct editors*, [illegible] *the New York Tribune—a paper so ably conducted in its political and exciting questions as that any reader of it* [illegible] *Mexico*. It was there recommended to the Whigs, in case the proviso should be lost, still to favor the adoption of the bill. It was a chance for peace—it was a plank to drowning men.

Mr. Speaker, when the bill with the proviso attached to it, which had passed this House, had been rejected in the Senate, I was but strengthened in the determination I had fixedly arrived at, that on the solution of such contingency, that is, on the rejection of such proviso by the Senate, I would vote *against* the proviso on the return of the bill to the House, *and save the loan*. And herein, Mr. Speaker, I am subject to no charge of tergiversation; and though I am aware there will be a burst of clamor against me for my course in the premises, I am prepared to meet my constituency, and appeal from the temporary excitement of disappointed faction or interested party, to the sober, sound, and enduring sense of patriotism, which distinguishes my State.

The impossibility of passing the bill through the Senate, with the proviso attached, suspected before, was made certain by the decisive vote of that body on Monday last. It was then as certain, that if we still clogged this measure—a measure, as I trust, the harbinger of peace—with a provision, so ungrateful to that honorable body, its fate was doomed. Without the means of negotiation, the President would be compelled to carry on a tedious war with Mexico, through the long vacation that awaits us, even with her disposition to consider the preliminaries of peace.

Mr. Speaker, when I saw on one side a somewhat obstinate demand for a sectional endorsement of a principle so deeply rooted among the free States as to require no such expression—a demand made by many of my political friends not in good faith, not from sincere attachment to its character, but from an ill-concealed desire to entrap associates even by the defeat of wholesome legislation, and, on the other, an immediate necessity for the passage of the bill without limitation, thereby sacrificing no principle, and endangering none, with the conviction that thus alone the bill could pass, and this chance of peace be preserved,—how was it possible I could hesitate! Upon such conviction, was there an alternative to be chosen? I performed my duty, Mr. Speaker, and in the same category would pursue the same conduct.

Mr. Speaker, on the subject of slavery, my opinions are known to my district. They are now as they ever were; they have been asserted, whenever occasion demanded their utterance. I hold slavery a great moral, social, and political evil; one that it becomes us, as sentient, reasoning beings, as philosophers and as Christians, to alleviate and abolish, *whenever we can*. But, under the Constitution, I acknowledge no power for any national interference with the institution. Congress could not, if it were desirous, abolish slavery in the States where it exists. An attempt of such kind would but serve to promote ridicule; it could not be seriously entertained. The institution of slavery is hedged in by the Constitution from external aggression: as much so as State governments, or other public corporations. They all depend upon the same instrument, and are equally protected.

But where the Constitution leaves slavery, there I would leave it. By no assent of mine shall it be invested with new powers, or gain greater influence, political or territorial; both or either. As a creature of the Constitution do I hold it; and if ever an attempt be made to control the power that recognised its organization, or prevents its exist-

ence, it shall receive from me nothing but decided and enduring opposition.

I regret very much, Mr. Speaker, that the discussion of this subject has elicited so much agitation. I would that we might reason as calmly and as sensibly on this as on any other question of morality or politics. Even truth, if it assume the form of denunciation or menace, loses respect, and provokes opposition; and who shall undertake to limit the boundaries of truth, or give it a parti-colored character?

Never, Mr. Speaker, since the world was first summoned from chaos to the present moment, has a principle perished: ourselves, mere adjuncts of the moment, fade and disappear with the time to which we are attached. Men, and the monuments of men, rush to extinction; but a principle, once brought into light, becomes immortal. Its triumph may be retarded, and, through whole series of ages, it may be struggling against doubt, and error, and wilful malice; but its destiny requires ultimate and full establishment.

I therefore have no fears, Mr. Speaker, of the future. The principle of liberty will work its own accomplishment. Slavery—a mere institution of human hands—will encounter the fate of its architect. In the course of time, chance or design, the necessities of man, or the silent workings of nature, will operate to the downfall of this temporary fabric. The institution of slavery has already, in my opinion, culminated, and now descends to its necessary extinction. Good sense, therefore, dictates a quiescent policy in regard to it.

But, while I would leave it where the Constitution found it, I repeat, I would prevent its transgression beyond those limits. Rather than pursue a course that would seem a concession to its further extension, I would now insist upon the adoption of this Wilmot proviso, even at the peril of this bill. Perish the bill—perish all our sanguine hopes of peace—rather than one jot or one tittle of a principle should be endangered!

But, Mr. Speaker, I am no alarmist; I wish to excite no precocious agitation in the country: and I therefore would seek no factitious opportunity for the unseasonable display of my sentiments hereupon. When the time comes, if ever it does come, that the slaveholding interest shall seek, with the cognizance of this Government, to extend its territorial power, I shall be found in determined opposition. For the embarrassment of an important measure, I am now unwilling to insist upon an amendment or an addition which has no necessary connexion with its character. Hereafter, there will be time enough, occasion enough, desire, ability, and patriotism enough, to discuss this agitating question in all its bearings and all its dependencies. When that time comes, if I am in public life, there will be found no hesitation, no vacillation, in my course.

The reports in the public press, and the assertions in this House, that the President may appropriate this money to the purchase of California or other Mexican territory, and by such means indirectly extend the institution of slavery, are scarcely, I think, worthy of sober consideration. No foreign territory can ever be acquired by this country without the consent of Congress: no treaty for such purpose can be ratified without two-thirds of the Senate. How is that consent or that ratification to be obtained, without the concurrence of the free States? It was northern and not southern votes that annexed Texas: it may be southern and not northern votes that will prevent the acquisition of more territory.

The occasion, I thought, had come; and, thinking so, I did not hesitate. I had given notice, that if the proviso were rejected in the Senate, and this bill should come back to us without such condition, I should vote for it as amended by the Senate.

Among the many considerations that weighed upon my mind and influenced my vote, there was one which stood preëminently above the rest. It was a belief—a sincere and, I think, well-founded belief—that had not this same bill, or one like in nature, been lost the last session of Congress, we should now have been at peace with Mexico, and have saved the lives of thousands of men and the expenditure of millions of money. Reasoning upon the same premises, I have confidence now that the grant and disposition of this loan will much hasten the consummation of peace. There may be a doubt, however—a reasonable doubt—of the efficacy of the measure; but the doubt is in favor of peace: for on the other side there is nothing but naked and drear certainty—a certainty of war, and of protracted war.

I have ever defended the necessity of this war; I have ever maintained that Mexico, and not ourselves, was to be blamed for its commencement; and I am of such opinion still. But we have been victorious, and can afford to be magnanimous; we have done enough for glory, and can yield something for peace. I acknowledge my desire for peace; the interests of the country require peace, and humanity demands it. It is, therefore, with the hope of consummating peace, that I vote for this peaceful measure. I voted for the Wilmot proviso, for the assertion of a *principle*: the principle was established by that vote, so far at least as my opinion or conduct is concerned. In voting against its second annexation to this bill, I have changed no principle, but have embraced expediency. I have hereby voted to concur in the amendment of the Senate, which requires the bill, the whole bill, and nothing but the bill. The bill is the principle, the proviso the incident. I am unwilling to sacrifice a *means*, a subsidiary necessary measure, for an *opinion*, however abstractly sound.

My motives in so doing will be misrepresented and my conduct denounced. My vote will be ascribed to corrupt considerations. Those who, in my place, would not have hesitated to ask payment in advance for their vote, will be the first, and most eager to calumniate me. The vices to which we are most inclined, we are most apt to accuse others of. It is the law of our depraved nature. And I cannot expect to escape the usual penalty that a conscientious discharge of duty is

obliged to pay to malignancy and venality. I will abide the issue.

I neither seek, nor want, office. I am no supplicant for Executive favors. Neither the smile nor the frown of power can influence my conduct. I seek to discharge my duty to my constituents and to my country. I may be mistaken in the means; I am right in the motive. I should have been false to my oath, false to those who have trusted me, and to my country, if from fear of temporary clamor, or of exaggerated zeal, of malignant or mistaken denunciation, I had suffered myself to be diverted from the course that calm deliberation had convinced me was right. I have done my duty, and throw myself willingly upon my country for its verdict.

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